

"Has he gone?" Ezra asked, taking in the situation with unerring shrewdness. The girl nodded.

"He's going to make a fool of himself, then? So he insists on traipsing after that slick fellow from the West, does he?"

"Oh, dad, I'm so miserable," sobbed the girl, going over to the old man and taking one of his hands.

"He doesn't know which side his bread is buttered on," was the grim reply. Then the old man went on in a softer tone:

"Listen, little girl. Your young man accused me of wanting to sell you to him for what he calls his honor. You know you can do just as you please. If he follows that crowd long enough, he'll lose every cent he's worth. He'll beggar himself. If you want to, go ahead and marry him. I won't do a thing to stop ye. But I'll never give my consent, not so long as he shows as little brains as he's showing now. After next year you won't need any consent; you'll be free. That's the way it stands."

"I'll do as you think best, dad," replied the girl. "Indeed I will."

AND then followed one of the most astonishing scenes that had ever taken place in the Mudge house. It may have surprised Ezra Mudge as much as any one. He put his long arms around the young woman, pulled her tightly to him, and kissed her twice on the cheeks.

"You're a good girl," he said simply. "I think the world of ye."

This unexampled demonstration was too much for Louise Searles. She fled from the room and took refuge in her own white pillows upstairs. Her brain seemed a whirling mass of incoherent ideas, words, and scenes. It was not until many minutes had passed that one clear statement separated itself from the rest and repeated itself several times:

"He don't know which side his bread is buttered on."

It was a homely expression that she had heard ever since she could remember. It had never had much significance for her; but now it had a new and appalling meaning.

"He don't know which side his bread is buttered on."

And then, as she considered that verdict of a time-worn old man upon a member of a younger generation, a little doubt urged itself deftly upon her. After all, was Walter Eadbrook entirely wrong?

WALTER EADBROOK had little opportunity, fortunately, to brood over his disastrous visit to Ezra Mudge. At the moment he arrived at his store a big touring car slid up and stopped with a grinding lurch. On the side of the automobile was a long strip of cloth on which had been painted and attached in such haste that the letters were smeared:

BOOST BOXTON!

Joel Tibb jumped from the car and ran toward the young shoe merchant.

"Where the dickens have you been keeping yourself, Walter?" he grumbled. "I've been in and out of your store three or four times, and couldn't find hide nor hair of you. Your boy Henry said you didn't tell him where you were going. You shouldn't run away like that just when we need you most."

"I'm sorry, Joel," was the reply. "I'll explain it to you later. I'm ready to take off my coat and go to work now."

"Pile into the car, then," ordered Joel. "We left Starr up at the Rev. Mr. Missmore's house. He's with us, heart and soul—I mean the parson is. Going to preach a sermon on 'Bigger, Better, Busier Boxtown' next Sunday."

As Eadbrook stepped around the back of the car to enter on the other side, another big cloth banner greeted him:

A LIVE TOWN FOR LIVE WIRES! BOOST!

"Starr painted 'em," explained Joel. "He can do 'most anything, I guess. We smooched 'em by putting 'em on before

they were dry. But we'll get some better ones when we have more time."

As the automobile sped down the main street, Joel continued his rapid fire of news. "We've got two other cars in action besides mine," he recited. "Edmonds is running one. He's out talking with the officers of the Grange. We've got to get the farmers lined up for town meeting, you understand. Treadway hired a small car, and he's taken Jennie with him to get the women-folks interested. The town's gone wild over the idea, Walter! There's a few kickers, of course, but they don't amount to anything. And you ought to hear the way they talk about Ezra Mudge. He hasn't got a real friend in the place. The only people that don't say just what they think of him are those that owe him money. And you can't blame them, of course."

"How about the merchants?" asked Eadbrook. "Do you think we can organize?"

"I should say we could organize. The only man that's standing out is Dud Gillette. Dud's got the idea that some way, when we get things going, I'll sell more groceries than he will. Ex-Senator Williams is red-hot for us. He don't like Ezra any too well, you know. He says he'll start the ball rolling with five hundred dollars, provided we can match it with another five hundred. Here's Starr now!"

"Well, we've captured the church—or one branch of it," laughed Mr. Starr as he climbed into the car. "How's Eadbrook? First time I've seen him to-day, isn't it?"

UNDERNEATH the hearty tone Eadbrook felt that Starr was conveying a slight intimation of doubt as to the young merchant's fixity of purpose. He decided to explain without further delay, and put himself right with his friends.

"Don't start the car yet," he told Joel. "I want to tell you where I was this morning. I was up at Ezra Mudge's. Had dinner there."

"Had dinner—at Ezra's?" echoed Joel incredulously. "You don't mean to say he's changed his mind?"

"He hasn't changed his mind, and he hasn't changed my mind either. Let me tell you how things stand."

It was rather an effort for Eadbrook to go into his personal affairs before a comparative stranger, but he saw no other course. He told the two men briefly what had happened. They listened intently; and every now and then, as Eadbrook was speaking, Starr uttered a vehement "What do you think of that?" and brought his fist down on the upholstery of the seat.

"And so that's where I stand," concluded the young man. "I tell you, Joel, he had me in a corner. It was a regular trap. Do you think I did the right thing?"

"Absolutely right," nodded Joel easily, as if the matter were definitely and happily settled.

But Starr was not so nonchalant about it.

"It's a bad mess, Eadbrook," he said. "It's serious. We've got to help you out, some way. I don't want to be the means of your losing the girl."

"You needn't consider my feelings at all," was the quick reply. "I just wanted to tell you how things stood. I don't expect any one to put themselves out in regard to the—personal side of it."

"You're all right, youngster," said Starr. "You're man-size. And don't you think for a minute we're not ready to help you to what you want. It looks to me as if that old boy had something on his mind he wouldn't like to tell. It isn't natural for a miser like him to bring up a child for nothing. It'll bear thinking over."

"Do you think he might be keeping her out of certain property or something like that?" asked Joel, turning to Starr.

"I think an antediluvian knocker like him would be equal to anything," was the reply. "Don't you get worried, Ead-

brook. We'll put the skids under that old pirate yet."

TOWN meeting day dawned as clear as a bell.

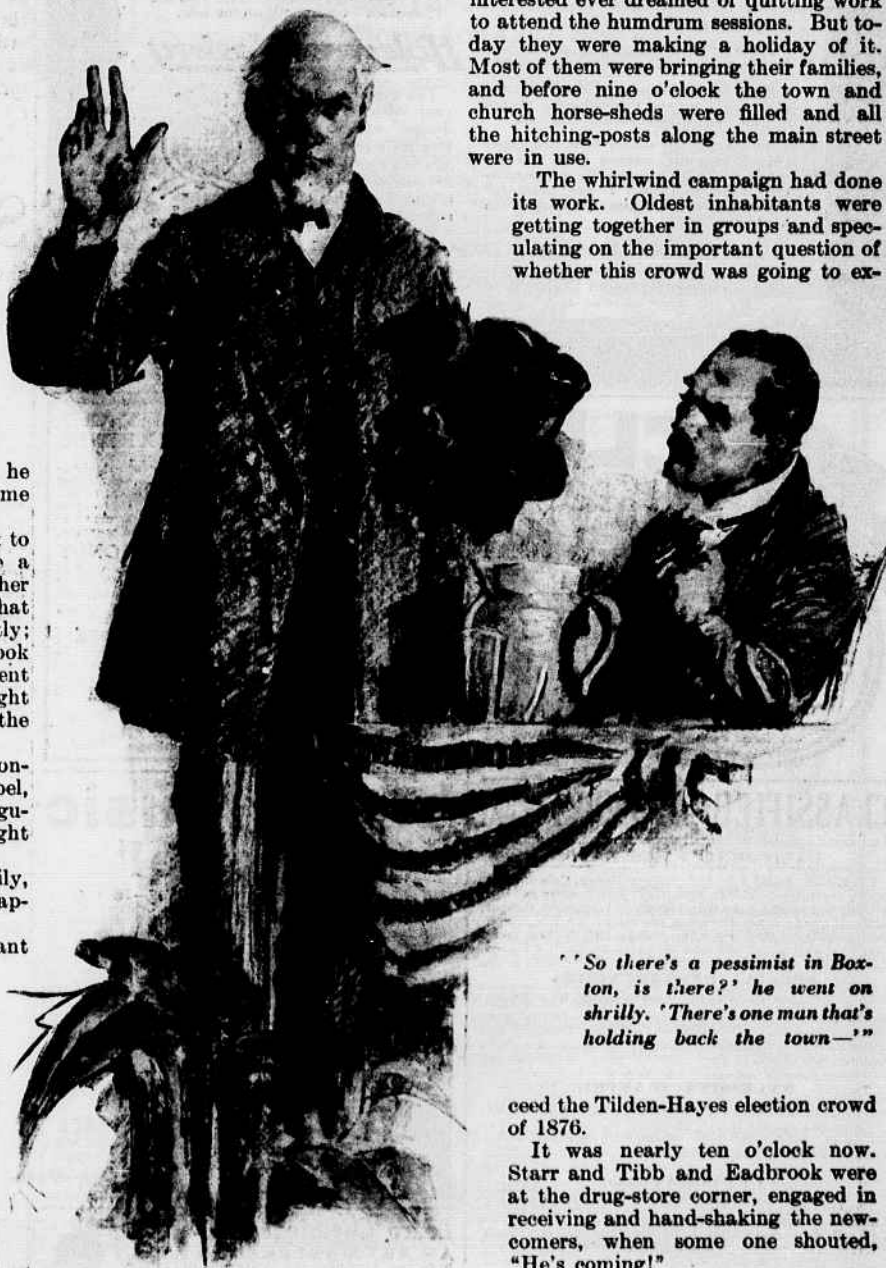
Eadbrook was out of bed at the first cock-crow, according to an agreement with Joel Tibb and Treadway and Starr, and the four men had an early breakfast at the Commercial House. Clint Weatherbee, during the meal, went roaring about the dining-room, threatening all persons known and unknown with a horrible fate in case the political program of the Boosters should fail. The spell that Mr. Starr had come to exercise over the hotel proprietor was almost pathetic.

"Say, Mr. Starr," he proposed, "you're sure you don't need me over there to throw some of them other fellows into the street if they get rambunctious?"

For at least the tenth time in the preceding twenty-four hours, Mr. Starr declined this offer of physical assistance. Clint shook his head doubtfully.

"Some of them mossbacks need it," he added. "I'd like to give old Ezra a toss out the window."

"Do you know," remarked Starr, as they emerged from the hotel, "that big boy keeps me on needles all the time. I'm afraid he'll hit somebody for disagreeing with me. You fellows didn't start this idea of honking Ezra, did you?"



"So there's a pessimist in Boxtown, is there?" he went on shrilly. "There's one man that's holding back the town—"

ceed the Tilden-Hayes election crowd of 1876.

It was nearly ten o'clock now. Starr and Tibb and Eadbrook were at the drug-store corner, engaged in receiving and hand-shaking the newcomers, when some one shouted, "He's coming!"

Every ear knew instantly who "he" was, and every eye turned toward the stretch of road north of the village, at the bend of the river. There was no mistake about it: the familiar high-seated buggy, the horse, the erect figure—no mistake about it at all. Ezra Mudge was coming down to town meeting.

"There'll be some fun when he gets here!" said a score of watchers at the same moment. And then a queer hush came

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